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ABSTRACT

The Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program is a 40-lesson elementary school curriculum that teaches children and their teachers to build positive, supportive relationships in the classroom. It is organized around three units: creating a cooperative classroom environment, building self-esteem and positive feelings, and solving people problems. The teacher research being conducted by participants in the Reach Out to Schools Program on the impact of the program in their classrooms and their teaching styles is described. The program is currently used in 18 school systems (47 schools) in the Boston (Massachusetts) area. Approximately 3,500 students and over 200 teachers have participated in the program. Training is provided for teachers and principals, and a parent component is being developed. Fifteen interviews were conducted with teachers new to the program in 1990-91. Subsequently, 65 teachers, 561 students, and 4 principals assessed the impact of the program in their classrooms. Teachers who have completed at least 1 year in the program may participate in a teacher research group. In these groups, teachers have conducted research projects that are clarifying program impacts. The program evaluation and teacher research have helped improve the curriculum, identify areas of success, and pose questions for further research. Efforts like the Reach Out to Schools Program and the Teacher Research Group demonstrate that teachers are ready and able to redefine their roles within the classroom, the school, and the research community. (SLD)

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Teacher Research and Program Evaluation

The Experience of the Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program

A Paper Presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting Atlanta, 1993

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The Stone Center for Development Services and Studies

The Stone Center is dedicated to the prevention of psychological problems, the enhancement of psychological well being, and the search for a more comprehensive understanding of human development. Particular attention is paid to the experience of women, children, and families across culturally diverse populations.

The mission is carried out through development of theory, research, education, consultation, action programs, and counseling.

The Stone Center was created in 1981 by a generaous gift to Wellesley College from Robert S. and Grace W. Stone, parents of a Wellesley graduate.

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Teacher Research For Program Evaluation

The Experience of the Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program

The Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program is a quite unique elementary school curriculum that teaches children and their teachers how to build positive, supportive relationships in the classroom. We label these new abilities "social competency skills" because they deal with making and maintaining friendships and learning how to solve conflicts. Teachers and children tell us it helps teach everyone how to get along and work together and that as a result, more work gets done ! Andrew, a fourth grader said:

> *"I guess what you are doing is getting supplies for your toolbox that you are going to need later in life to fix up problemsthat you have. I think the most important thing we have learned is how to solve problems in a peaceful way. That helps in the real world and especially on the playground."*

This paper describes the teacher research being conducted by participants in the Reach Out to Schools Program on the impact of the program in their classrooms and on their teaching styles. After briefly describing the development of the Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program, I will discuss the rationale for choosing teacher research as a principal form of evaluation for the program. I will then review the actual research being done by the teachers and what we have learned through the process of teacher research and share some reflections by the participants about the teacher research group. Finally I will suggest some ways that teacher research can be supported and encouraged by school systems as an innovative approach to professional development and program evaluation.

The Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program

> **"Children live in high risk environments, making difficult, sometimes life threatening decisions. We need to help children with decision making, problem solving. To do that, teachers need explicit help and training--they haven't had any preparation for these challenges."**
> **Edna Cason, Principal**
> **Mozart School, Boston, MA.**

Background

The statistics that reflect the health and academic success of the children in the United States are truly alarming. In 1989, the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families released a report that one fifth of all children in this country live in poverty, that one half of all African American children and one fourth of all preschoolers are poverty

stricken and that young children continue to be the single largest group living below the poverty line. Statistics also point to mounting problems relating to poverty and family distress. Recent data suggests that 15-22 % of the nation's 63 million children and adolescents have mental health problems severe enough to warrant treatment while only 10-15% of those in need receive even minimal service. Traditional approaches from the field of mental health to meet some of the extensive psychological and social needs of young people emphasize individual treatment, address only a small portion of the children in need and often are very expensive. In addition, past practice has been to recommend for treatment those children who have already developed serious maladaptive behaviors and has remained heavily child centered paying little attention to the family, school, and community settings that may create and perpetuate a child's difficulties (Weissberg, 1991). Our children are experiencing the results of significant changes in all aspects of American society: dramatic changes in family composition, increased poverty rates, and the erosion of traditional neighborhoods, extended families, and a sense of community. As a result, increasingly large numbers of children whether from urban or suburban homes enter school with identified risk factors.

In 1986, the National Institute of Mental Health recommended that all school curricula include social competency building instruction as one strategy to prevent social and behavioral problems in children (Elias, 1989). This was based on the belief that that childhood problems in peer relationships, often the result of deficiencies in social skills, are associated with adjustment problems in adolescence and adulthood. Given the opportunity to learn social competency skills, children's ability to make and maintain relationships with peers would increase and the likelihood of future adjustment problems would decline. The NIMH recommendation has encouraged the growth of some programs in some schools. However these efforts are often of short duration, targetted to only certain grades, (usually 5th or 6th) and teach particular skills relating to substance abuse or other health threatening behaviors. The effort by NIMH to initiate prevention programs for all children recommended the school as the most desirable site for prevention programs. Yet, in many ways our schools are also at risk reflecting the problems of the larger community.

Recent reports highly critical of our schools have documented a long list of problems including low student achievement, high dropout rates, high rates conflict and violence, and poor teacher preparation and performance. Often such reports urge improved performance through more requirements and increased testing. In contrast, a recent report "Voices From the Inside" from the Institute for Education in Transformation at the Claremont Graduate School has identified seven key issues from the perspective of those inside the school: teachers and staff, students, and the parents whose children attended the schools studied. The report argues that the problems identified in research about schools are in fact consequences of much deeper

and more fundamental problems. Participants in the study felt that the crisis inside our schools is directly linked to a lack of positive human relationships in the schools. Students noticed that teachers had little time for personal attention, parents feared that their children would be demoralized by impersonal relationships, and teachers, urged to emphasize students test results, acknowledged that they often do not know their students or understand their cultural differences and have little time to develop collegial relationships with their peers. The theme of relationships and the central role that they play in schools and children's learning "was predominantly stated and deeply connected to all other issues" (1993). One student in the report mentioned above was asked how it felt to go to school. He replied, "it wounds my spirit". The Reach Out to Schools Program is an effort build positive relationships and restore the spirit to children, their teachers, and their families.

Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program Components

The **Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program** is a primary prevention program which provides the opportunity for elementary school children of all grades, their teachers, and their parents to learn and practice relational, communication, and problem solving skills. The Program is currently used in 18 school systems (47 schools) within Boston and the greater Boston metropolitan area. Approximately 3,500 students and over 200 teachers have participated in the program. The Program began in 1987, under the leadership of Carolyn Swift, former director of the Stone Center, and was implemented in the Framingham Public Schools, using the Quality of School Life curriculum written by Ruth F. Schelken. Between 1988 and 1991, the Social Competency Program evolved from QSL curriculum to include aspects of other well researched methods of instruction in social competency skills (Spivack, Platt & Shure, 1976; Weissberg et all, 1980; Elias & Clabby, 1989) and the core concepts of the Stone Center relational theory initially developed in the writings of Jean Baker Miller(1976, 1986,1992). As a result of a substantial gift from a local supermarket the program was able to expand. In 1990-1991 18 teachers were trained. In 1991-1992, 65 teachers from nine towns and cities in the Boston area were trained in the curriculum. During the Fall of 1992 an additional 140 teachers began their participation in the program; 150 training spaces are planned for Fall 1993.

The Reach Out to Schools: Social Competency Program includes;

- a 40 lesson curriculum
- four full days of teacher training in the skills and concepts of the curiculum
- a commitment to year long instruction for all students within the classroom by the classroom teacher

- a two year teacher consultation model which encourages and supports changes in teacher behavior toward an increased use of facilitation and problem solving skills in all aspects of the classroom
- a series of workshops for parents to introduce them to the skills and concepts of the program
- a participatory evaluation strategy that includes teachers as researchers as well as external assessment procedures

A brief description of these elements is included below:

Curriculum

The 40 lesson Reach Out to Schools curriculum is appropriate for kindergarten though six grade. It is organized around three units:

- **Creating a cooperative classroom environment**
- **Building self -esteem and positive feelings**
- **Solving people problems**

The curriculum is implemented two times a week for 15 minutes during the entire school year by regular classroom teachers and students meeting together in an Open Circle. The curriculum initially provides a structured format to facilitate the teaching of social competency skills in elementary school classrooms and a safe context for the ongoing discussion of issues important to the class. From this core foundation, teachers and students are encouraged to apply the concepts to other areas of classroom and to the entire school. Although some adaptations are made for grade level differences all skills are taught in all grades K-6 and a common language is developed across the grade levels for all students in the school This format gives students the opportunity to learn and practice all the skills throughout their elementary years and increases the likelihood that they will access these skills as the challenges they face in middle and high school escalate.

Training and Consultation for All Teacher Participants

The teacher training component of the Reach Out to Schools Program is a opportunity for teachers to assess their own social competency skills as well as learn facilitation techniques to develop these skills with children. Consultation throughout the school year provides ongoing support to teachers as they implement the program.

In their first year of participation in the program, teachers come to Wellesley College for four full days of training: two in September, one in January, and one in April. The entire training is carefully planned to reflect and model the skills developed in the student curriculum: communication, facilitation, and problem solving within a group setting. The use of the College as a training site and the respectful and professional delivery of the training

program is a reflection of our view of the central role of classroom teachers in building community within the classroom. Twice during their first year, teachers return to the college for two hour afterschool meetings in which they share their successes and concerns about the curriculum, and hear suggestions from other teachers and staff about how to address these concerns.

Consultants visit each school six times during the school year. During a visit the consultant either models a lesson or observes the classroom teacher during an Open Circle. The consultants provide reassurance and support for teacher's efforts to change behaviors within their classrooms and play an important role as a link between training, the actual implementation of the curriculum in the classroom, and support for the program by school administrators.

In their second year of the program teachers are visited twice by the consultants and participate in discussion groups in their schools. The purpose of these meetings is twofold: to gather data from the teachers concerning the impact of the program in their classrooms and to offer the support and suggestions of other teachers (and program staff) to address whatever issues teachers identify concerning the implementation of the curriculum in their classrooms.

Training for Principals

Principals play an important role in implementing and supporting the Social Competency program in their schools by encouraging teacher and student commitment to the program and by modeling the skills in their own interactions. Principals from all the schools where teachers are being trained are invited to the college for 2 half days of training. This day includes an introduction to the training process, a review of the core concepts in the curriculum and reflection on strategies for supporting the program in the schools. As mentioned above, consultants do work with principals throughout the year to increase their understanding of the potential of the program and to encourage their explicit support schoolwide applications of the program.

Parent Program

The parent component of the program is currently being developed. A parent newsletter and general informational presentation are in place for all schools. Parent focus groups will be held during the Spring of 1993 determine what elements of the curriculum students have brought home as well as the topics parents would like to see included in the new parent curriculum. Parent workshops will begin in the 1993-1994 school year and will address parenting styles and provide specific instruction and practice in the social competency skills included in the children's curriculum as well as provide a support group for parents as they try these new behaviors with their families. We are exploring who in each school would provide the most effective leadership for these groups.

On Going Research 1990-1993

Fifteen interviews with teachers who were new to the program in 1990-1991 were conducted in May 1991. Several themes emerged from these interviews. Teachers joined the program because they view the acquisition of social competencies as a central responsibility of an elementary school curriculum and because they are increasingly concerned about the extent and intensity of the emotional and behavioral problems that children are bringing to school. Teachers found the curriculum format clear and easy to incorporate into their school day. They reported that the training program was particularly successful in helping them to develop facilitation skills and to begin the process of reflection on their own teaching style. When describing the impact of the curriculum on their classrooms, teachers indicated the following results:

- *the use of a common language for discussion and problem solving*
- *greater participation by all students in discussions*
- *increased time for academic work as children learned to manage many interpersonal problems themselves*
- *carry over of Circle lessons to other classroom/school activities*
- *greater inclusion of special education students in regular classes*
- *increased ability to problem solve together*

During the 1991-1992, 65 teachers, 561 students and 4 principals in the program were asked to assess the impact of the program in their classrooms and schools. Data was collected in interviews, journal reflections and surveys. Teachers repeated many of the same reasons for joining the program but added that the positive response of their colleagues to the first year of the program encouraged their participation. They described many of the same results as the teachers from 1990-1991. Students liked the Open Circle, reported using the suggested behaviors themselves, and felt the Circle was beneficial to other children as well. (see project reports for complete data). Principals saw the program both as a proactive effort to teach children needed skills before problems behaviors escalated and as a positive staff development opportunity to help experienced teachers re-examine their thinking about teaching and learning.

The support for 1992-1993 research has come from Florence V. Burden Foundation. The goal of this component of the Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program was to pilot a number of protocols to determine the effects of the Program on children's self esteem and self competency, their grades, behavior and attendance, and social support received by the child from others in his/her life including parents, siblings, friends and teachers. To this end the Harter Scale of Perceived Self-Competency and the Harter Social Support Scale was administered to a total of 228 third, fourth, and fifth graders in 4 schools (10 classrooms) in a

suburban community outside of Boston. Half of the children have participated in the Program from one to two years, the other half have not received the curriculum. The scales were administered in September, 1992 and will be readministered in May 1993. Analysis of the results of the first administration is currently underway. The school record review, a teacher's assessment of the Child's Actual Behavior (Harter), and a yet to be developed measure of the process of problem solving and conflict resolution by students using the Reach Out to Schools program and those in the control group will be administered during Spring, 1993. Also scheduled for the Spring are separate focus groups with children and teachers in the study classrooms. In addition, each of the classrooms in the study have been videotaped and an analysis of these tapes is underway and will be reported on this summer.

Teacher Research for Program Evaluation within the Reach Out to Schools Program

The evaluation plan for this program is designed to reflect and reinforce the goals of the program: to build improved relationships -- in this case between educational researchers and practitioners---and to develop a sense of shared community and achievement. The first goal of the evaluation is to assure the ongoing use of the curriculum in a manner consistent with the philosophy of the Program and the direction provided by the training process. This is done through extensive self reporting by students, teachers, principals, and parents as well consultants' observations. We try to hear from everyone. The second goal is to assess the long term impact of the program on children and their teachers. This involves a longitudinal study which is currently in place in ten classes to track students who have and have not used the programs in their classrooms as well as extensive interviews with teachers who have used the program for more than one year. This research is possible because of an ongoing collaboration with one of the school systems using the Program and with teachers who give their time for these interviews. The third goal is to develop with teachers mutually constructed and respectful evaluation procedures which address their concerns about the program, encourage their voices as evaluators of its effectiveness, and build a sustained commitment to the program through systematic study and reflection . The Teacher Research Group is the strategy employed to achieve this third goal.

Teacher research is a form of action research characterized by systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers into the life in the classroom. A partnership of this type between research and application is not well developed in the public school environment and in order to understand the choice of teacher researcch as a form of evaluation, it may help to described the general idea of action research. Action research occurs when members of a community or organization undertake to study problems they have defined and to suggest and implement

solutions to those problems based on their research findings. The commonly used definition of action research (Rapaport, 1970) suggests its goals:

> "Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by the joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework."

Some examples of action research come from the private sector. Typically, employees and managers form a study committee to guide the research into a problem. Together they formulate interview questions, act as participant observers, design questionnaires, plan and deliver feedback to the management and finally to the whole plant or factory. In Changemasters, Rosabeth Moss Kanter discussed this process of creating alternative organizational forms within an existing organization. She described problem solving teams whose members are respresentative of many roles within the organization. She refers to these teams as parallel structures which act to mediate the rigidity of bureaucratic systems and introduce innovation into the organization (Kanter, 1982).

In public settings, action research has been used by local community groups to attempt to solve school and community problems. Action research combines the development of confidence with specific action. Fact finding and the skills of analysis that result from research methodology can cut problems down to a more human scale (Parker & Jacobsen,1974). Research thus becomes a form of action when it is done, not by the experts, but by the people who themselves must act: parents, high school students, commmunity residents, teachers (Palmer & Jacobsen, 1974). It can also become a form of empowerment as people are organized to define problems, gather facts and in the process develop competencies, and see opportunities for specific action. This parallels the concept of empowerment described by Cochran that asserts that individuals know best what they need and should be encouraged to identify and fulfill those needs rather than follow those set by outsiders.

A similar research tradition emerged from the work of Paolo Freire's approach to adult education which seeks to "engage individuals in critical analysis and organized action to improve their situations" (Freire, 1981). This form of research has as its ultimate goal a fundamental structural transformation and improvement of the lives of those involved (Brown,1984). Researchers often train local people to use research skills, develop a network of groups committed to using the information generated, and mobilize a larger constitutency to influence local, state, or regional decision makers. Participatory researchers encourage their clients to define the problem from their own perspective. The success of the research is

measured by the increased strength of the client community and its progress through the stages of empowerment.

This model does not fit easily into the current school setting. Yet, while teachers may not be correctly defined as "oppressed", in many ways their lack of autonomy and decision making power within the urban school bureaucracies is similar to the powerlessness described in Friere's work.

Recently there have been some efforts to by teachers to research their teaching and learning experience and share that with their colleagues. It provides a role for teachers in generating new knowledge about teaching and learning by making the school a center of inquiry (Schaefer, 1967). Teacher research is defined as a systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers: a desire to make sense of their experiences by establishing the research agenda themselves in contrast to following a research agenda set by the universities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Through teacher journals, essays, interviewing, and classroom studies, teachers have begun to adopt a learning stance toward classroom life and to report their findings to their colleagues. Teacher research as currently used describes a wide range of activities within the general category of action research. One of the leaders in this field is Lawrence Stenhouse who sees teacher research as part of a process to demystify and democractize research and believes that through their own research, teachers can strength their judgement and improve their practice (Hustler, Cassisy & Cuff, 1986). Unlike university research, teacher research is not supported by the institution within which the researchers work. It struggles "on the fringe" of the K-12 structure and certainly does not have the legitimacy currently given what has been called "high status knowledge" attained through traditional modes of inquiry (Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 1990). However, supporters of teacher research argue that it can play a central role in creating new learning both for the school based teacher community and the university based research community. They describe the "power of research to help understand and ultimate transform teaching practice" as teachers find connections between theory and practice, become critical readers of research, and change the "nature of classroom discourse" (Goswami &Stillman, 1987).

Some teacher action research teams do not look exclusively at their own classroom practice, as is currently typical of teacher research, but rather at the school wide problem such as, for example, the lack of positive parent teacher cooperation. The model for this design was the work done in the Master In Learning (MIL) project sponsored by the National Educational Association. (Livingston &Castle, 1989). MIL is a school based education reform initiative to help "faculties take an active role in directing school renewal" by developing a school profile, inventorying faculties, reviewing research and developing a comprehensive change effort based on research and faculty priorities. Designers of the model believe that "without active

practitioner involvement in the creation of knowledge, the body of information is less germane to the persistent problems of schooling" and that the traditional model of researcher/practitioner relationship in education has separated the two "positing the research community as the source of knowledge to be applied by personnel in the schools" (Livingston & Castle, 1989). The project offers an model of school reform where, on one hand, research informs practice and, on the other, "intelligent practitioners through deliberations, make important connections and adaptations themselves" (Livingston & Castle, 1989). Thus the research goal reflects the ideal: "to frame situations or problems differently and interpret reality through new metaphors" (Schon, 1983, 1987). The potential is well described by Claryce Evans who began Teacher Initiated Research at Harvard in the early 1980's:

> *"The knowledge that teachers have about educational practice and the enormous potential power of that knowledge to inform practice is undervalued both by teachers themselves and by the rest of the education profession. As a result there are too few occasions for teachers to share with each other amd make public their deeper understandings of their work. The lack of a foum in which teachers carry on in depth professional conversations over long periods of time perpetuates in turn the view that teacher's knowledge has little to contribute to further understanding in the field....Not only is teachers cumulative knowledge undervalued, their central role in the profession is also unacknowledged. Educational practice is what teachers do: students' educational experience is most directly the experience they have with teachers. If research is to affect practice, it must be through what teachers do, how they do it, and what it means to them. It must address their central concerns and be accessible to them."*

Working collaboratively with teachers and having their questions shape the research agenda is a priority of the Reach Out to Schools Program for several reasons. By joining evaluation and teacher research we have tried to weakened the boundries between what were once different communities: between those who teach children, those who teach teachers, those who administer, and those who do research. Also we believe that the results of an evaluation are better if participants in the program are directly involved in it: "the close observation of one student, or a systematic focus on one question, or the simple act of keeping a journal of classroom incidents and observations can generate new insights and knowledge simply inaccessible to the infrequent outside observer" (Kincheloe, 1991). We have seen that teachers increase their understanding and commitment to the program by participation in all aspects of its development and implementation. Through classroom based research, discussion, and reflection teachers build sustained ownership and commitment to the curriculum and the change

process it advocates. Finally, by creating a participatory evaluation process and encouraging teachers to try out new roles (facilitiators, mentors, and researchers) within this program, we hope to support the view of teachers as professionals and to further encourage teacher involvement in the overall school reform process.

The Teacher Research Group

Teachers who have completed at least one year with the program may choose to participate in a Teacher Research Group which meets for two hours at the Stone Center each month throughout the school year. Five teachers began research last year, five others joined this year. Each teacher designed (often with the help of the group and much discussion) a classroom based project to assess one aspect of the Reach Out to Schools Program that he/she was interested in exploring. Each month during the teacher research meeting the discussions move between research updates, questions about the research process and the everpresent realities of school life which act as barriers to such work. As the facilitator of the teacher research group, I do not set a particular agenda but encourage teachers to share with the group how their research is proceeding. I also tape and transcribe each meeting and share the transcriptions with the teachers. I have decided not to explicitly "teach research": as questions related to research methodology come up, we try to deal with them, but our focus has remained the questions teachers ask and the ways we can simply and manageably collect data within the classroom settings. The Teacher Research Group provides support for teachers to take time to reflect on what is happening in their classes--support which is not part of their worklife within the K-12 system.

The Role of Facilitator

Some past research on schools has been labelled "an aggressive pursuit of pathology", a "conversation often critical, cynical, marked by a search for pathology" (Lightfoot, 1988). The effect has been too often to "make the teachers and students objects of research" rather than "to choose problems of interest and concern to researchers, teachers, and students" (Noddings, 1986). As a former high school teacher, I had seen researchers come and go, mostly go. I rarely read their journals and like many of my peers found the university somewhat out of touch with the realities of children, classrooms, and schools that I experienced. There was one exception. During the 1981-82 school year as part of her studies which eventually became *The Good High School*, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot visited the school where I was employed. She spent several days at the school, interviewing and observing. I found her questions thought provoking, and when I read the chapter in *The Good High School* which detailed "my" school, I saw entirely new ways of thinking about and understanding the work of the school. Perhaps that was a

function of a limited view on my part. But, I also knew that a part of what Lightfoot had written had come from us; all of us who participated in her study had known something worth sharing. She was particularly gifted as a researcher and author and had given us a perspective on ourselves that we could not have achieved without outside assistance. Later, when I had the opportunity to shape this evaluation, it seemed to me that while I could not match her gift, I might be able to try her process. I hoped to "learn the answers to questions that I would not even have had the sense to ask" (Whyte, 1981).

I had glimpsed a second perspective on schools as organizations during my two year study for a Masters in Business Administration. Leaving my teaching/administrative position, attending business school, and concentrating on organizational analysis in my studies there provided me with a particular frame of reference when I returned to the field of education. I found the methodology of case studies extremely compelling as a useful tool in teacher education and professional development. As I investigated alternative management orientations and strategies (matrix organzation, participatory management, problem solving teams, quality circle, etc.) I came to understand more fully the impact of organizational structure on human behavior and to see that schools, having evolved into a bureaucratic format, could not become better places for children to learn until they were better places for adults to work.

This Spring teachers will report on their work to other teachers who are using curriculum in their classes. The unique aspect of the teacher research being done on the Reach Out to Schools Program is that it both informs the individual teachers and the overall evaluation of the program. The research has provided ongoing feedback to the program staff on ways to adapt and improve the curriculum. It has documented the impact of the curriculum on children in several classrooms. It has also raised important questions about the incorporation of this program into current school organization and has surfaced complex questions for future research. By mirroring the goals of the entire program it has helped to create a sense of collaboration and co-construction of the program among all the participants and the voices of teachers, often ignored in research and program evaluation, is being explicitly encouraged and supported.

The Research Projects

I think this will all be much clearer if we look at some of the research projects. I do want to note that we expect to publish these studies in the future and it is not my intention here to make a complete report of each of the research projects. Rather I want to share some information about some of the studies as a way of looking at the process of supporting teacher research and encouraging a more central role for teachers in the process of research and

evaluation of programs and interventions in their schools. Briefly stated, here is a sample of the studies and their findings to date.

As a second grade teacher at the Wheelock School in Medfield Ma, Elizabeth Busconi was intersted in whether her students actually used the skills taught in the program during other parts of their day in school and at home. She has established reporting circles inwhich the students are asked to share examples of when they have used a particulr skill. These circles take place each month, and now focus on five of the key skills taught in the program. Liz audiotapes the children's stories and charts their reporting on a large poster board so all the children see themselves as participating in the research project. The findings related to the study on carry over demonstrated that children in this second grade use the skills learned in the program with their classmates, their siblings, and their parents. They use it to share their feelings, solve problems that arise, and to encourage others (and themselves) when faced with challenges such as school work or outside performances. They have so many stories to tell and wanted so much to tell them, that a new time was created: "reporting circle":

(October 1991)

"Now we are doing circle three times a week, two times for skills and once for reporting We need to study fewer skills, but there is definitely carry over. I didn't realize how much they wanted to share. For children who hadn't done it, they listened and I think got motivated. That's alright too. The documentation could lead to carry over, incentive for the others.

In addition to finding more carry over than expected, Liz became more comfortable using the tape recorder.

(April 1992)

"I was doing this and the children were telling me stories and some were appropriate stories and some indicated they had the idea of problem solving and some didn't. It was great, you could really tell. The last time I taped you couldn't hear them, the voices were too soft so this time I repeated them. They said it, then I said it. "

And, by January 1993 Liz commented that the taping was also as aid for her in assessing her own teaching.

"I talked to them after I record their stories. I listened to the tape several times. I listened to the quality of their comments. I could actually see where I needed to actually reteach the skill, go back."

In Framingham, MA, at the Potter Road School in a 4th grade, Doreen Leavey wanted to understand if the message of inclusion taught throughout the Open Circle curiculum would have an impact on the inclusion of bilingual students new to her classroom. She devised a series of measures and questionnaires for the students to determine if they understood and practiced inclusive behaviors. At the end of the year she interviewed the bilingual students and their parents to determine if they were happy with the classroom and wanted to continue with the program. Her findings were an important window on how the curriculum helps to bring together many diverse groups within the classroom:

(October 1992)

"I want to look at the inclusion issue. I have 8 bilingual students this year. Every eight weeks we change seats and I ask the children who they want to sit next to and the reason they are choosing these people. My question is about how the program works to create an inclusive classroom."

March 1992)

"I was really concerned about the bilingual students this year, about whether they would be included, chosen for project work. These kids were in a bilingual class in grade three and into my regular fourth grade this year. It was a big change, we recommended it as a pilot to change school policy for greater inclusion. These kids came to our school especially for this from their neighborhoods to try mainstreaming. It's a big change, it's not 'their' school. But the data shows that children choose them as often as any other children. Some of the children chosen barely speak English but it doesn't seem to matter. One child said,' translating it kind of fun'."

(April 1992)

"I had a conference with one of the parents. I went to her home, we met in her livingroom. I said to the mother you have to think about whether her daughter would stay in the new school, in these classes. There was no question, she said she wanted her to stay!"

Further interviews with the bilingual students confirmed their feelings of belonging and their awareness of the behavior of others that had helped them feel included in the classroom.

Also, in Framingham, MA, Pat Nichols was curious about what she perceived as the differences between the contributions and participation of boys and girls in her 4th grade class during Open Circle lessons that dealt with feelings and those that dealt with problem solving. Pat used questionnaires and later videotaped her Open Circles to get a closer look at what was happening . What is different about this study is the way it helped to raise all of our

awareness about the issues of gender in the classroom. This is clear from Pat's observations after watching a video of her class and the discussion that followed:

(January 1993)

Pat: "When we were rerunning it--watching it was interesting. Boys were very apt to talk about athletics and sports, when they got exluded from games. Then we they got into smaller games like recess, females talked about being excluded. It's (the video) a perfect way for me to look at my reactions to boys and how much time do I give them. My initial reaction is that, with out counting, is that they get alot of time---to talk about their sports etc. Then we moved on to the smaller group activities on the playground.

Jean: Let's think about this data you have. If Pat has three videos of her class, how can this be useful, what can we do with this?

Pat: Last year my initial reaction during problem solving was that boys were more involved and silly during feeling words lessons.

Jean: Do you want to look at 'floor time' How long they speak?

Pat: That's what I noticed on the tape, they have a lot of time.

Andrea: Do we give it to them, do they take over? What about our expectations?

Ron: Do you call only on raised hands?

Carol: (in reference to the 1992 Wellesley Center for Research on Women 's Gender Bias Study)...but it's also a matter of asking girls different questions and expecting different answers; the teachers in the study didn't know they were doing it !

Jean: Pat, you have the kids on tape and you have you on tape. That's very courageous. Plus you are writing about it. Just begin with the tape, count how many girls speak, how many boys with the time each takes.

Pat: It hadn't occurred to me; the number of times, now after looking at it it's also the time they take. There were 6 boys in a row, they 're really long winded! The boys stories of exclusion aren't really stories of exclusion either. They say 'I didn't get to play hockey, but I know I'm good, it was just time to sit out'. When the girls give examples, it's more like, 'I asked to play and they said no, but my friend went over and they said ok to her'. I think the girls talk and are very open but what I got that I hadn't noticed before I saw the tape was I think boys do talk but they aren't too open, but girls are very open. What I found by watching the tapes is that boys talked a lot more, more than girls; girls seem more sensitive, dealings with the topic somewhat more than boys.

Ron: When you do the circle, do you call on people who raise their hands?

Pat: Pam suggested that I say something like I would like to hear from everyone, that really opened people up and we go around the circle to give statements about the lesson for the day. They can pass it they want.

Ron: It might be interesting to look at responses of people called on, not the hand raisers. If you wait, make eye contact, and call on all of them. If I went by hands only or if other teachers go by raised hands boys will automatically raise their hands. I'm pulling teeth with the girls and ignoring the boys !"

As you can hear in this discussion, there are many issues related to gender in the use of this curriculum, not only in terms of what style of participation each sex may bring to the Open Circle meetings, but the role of the teacher in shaping that participation. Here is a study that highlighted important programmatic issues related to teacher training and curriculum as well as individual teacher concerns.

Ron Chick, a sixth grade teacher at the Woodrow Wison School also in Framingham chose his most difficult and troubled student and together they designed a student/teacher research project to help the student focus more on his own behavior and the consequences of it. The student collected data on his behavior and other's reaction to it, entered it in the computer daily and then talked with Ron about what it seemed to show. This project reached real highs and lows and only after some distance could Ron reflect on what a "successful" outcome really meant.

(December '91)

Ron: "My issue, what I wanted to do was to focus on the student with the most difficulties in the classrrom. It's something near and dear to me--the person most trouble--someone who needs lots of attnetion and support. Often the law of diminishing returns; with more effort the less you seem to get out of it. It seems to me you aren't making that connection often and early enough so I used this opportunity to focus on my most troubled child academically, socially, emotionally. "

Ron went on to describe this student's (Ray) behavior in previous years as reported to him by other teachers:

"He talks out, is disruptive, if 15 people are in the way, he will bull his way through-no apologies, no excuses -calls peers "jerks" says "I'll get you after school". Bascially he maintains his status through aggressive behavior and verbal intimidation. Not a well liked kid. I used the sociogram idea from Doreen's research project and asked all the

students to name three students they would work on a class project with, and three they wanted to play with at recess. That's 6 opportunities and 17 kids and he didn't come up at all. His behaviors were usually offensive to other kids. Socially he was having lots of difficulty, his academics were limited, no focus, incomplete work, he can't seem to finish...."

"But now he's on the computer at the end of the day--and I gave him a clipboard for the sheet. The first day 11/27 he gave someone a compliment about his sneakers and the lunchroom adie said he did a good job (he asked something and actually said please). He told someone "good thinking" as a compliment. The first day he side to me "I'm going to be a different person, you aren't going to know me, I'm going to do so good." On Tuesday the librarian said he had good library skills. That's two adults in four days ! On the third day he observed others using skills and responses, on the fourth day he gave 3 or 4 compliments: 'Jessica you look like you are from a Pert Plus commercial'. He got a compliment; the art teacher said he had a good day! He's on the computer everyday. His behavior on 1-10 with ten as worst would be a 2."

But not everything went as smoothly as it did during the first few weeks and that unevenness generated some important reflection on what it was that Ron and Ray were trying to do:

(January 16, 1992)
Ron: "We need a program for needy teachers !Well, the shine has worn off ! The break between December and January; he even missed 6 of 12 school days. Something strange has happened, a passivity in his behavior, he's lost interest. I have to chase him to enter the date. The Principal sent a letter home and this week he got two detentions. I 'm staying with it, he wants to stay with it, but getting him back on track....It was successful, changed his behavior from actively aggressive to-I don't know-then passive-then aggressive with others but not with me. Shine has worn off but good, but in hard times, can the process really help? "

Ron: "He's out one or two days a week, he has trouble connecting on a day after a day absent. The thing I saw--I wanted to focus on academics, Jean said stay with behavior but looking only at behavior the behavior change was great but academics didn't improve.
Jean: It's a good question. What do we think? More emphasis on academics?
Liz: His academics and behavior are both poor.

Ron: Academics always poor.

Liz: Stay with behavior. Even if you get academics up and behavior doesn't change, it's no long term improvement. If you keep behavior on keel, academics will come up.

Ron: Well, it would be boring if he was consistent."

(March 12, 1992)

Ron: "This project has held students together. Last week a hood ornament was missing from one of the teachers cars; everyone in the room seemed to know where it went, that he did it. If not for this project we wouldn't have had a way to talk about this. He cried, unhappy, a down day. In the context of the circle and then we discussed it privately. He was right there behind me and we discussed it with others. We went for a submarine sandwich together for lunch. It's the relationships with him, so that we can discuss issues."

(September 1992)

(telling the new group about Ray)

Ron: "By the end of the year, I wasn't that enthusiastic (about how the project went) until I realized he didn't regress, didn't get worse. He came to see me at the beginning of this year. and said,'Bet you never thought you would hear this but I love going to school'. We built a fantastic relationship, with him, with his Mom. Communication was possible, related to conflicts that came up."

(January 21, 1993)

Ron: "You know, with Ray, the project has a significant effect not only on his behavir and relationship with the class and most important his relationhip to me and mine with him and all for the positive even though his grades didn't change I think he made a lot of growth that we would not have made (outside of grades) and our relationships was terrific throughout the year and even though he was this real problem, a real difficult kid. He had real problems with other teachers, but he and I could sit down and discuss issues, problem solve using the steps."

Nancy Thompson and Carol MacDonald joined the group this year . While their research has just begun, they have introduced two important new topics. Nancy teaches third grade at the Burke School in Medway, Ma. and Carol teaches a third grade in the Clyde Brown School in Millis, MA. Nancy wanted to determine if what the children were learning

in the Social Competency curriculum was information that had not learned previously and if as a result of the curriculum they actually had new knowledge. She has converted a format for assessing progress in academic areas (What do you know?, What do you want to know?, and What have you learned ?") into an assessment tool for social competency knowledge. To date she has assessed lessons on listening and giving and receiving compliments. Carol was interested in ways the children used the lessons of social competency at home and in how parents could become more involved in the program. She has conducted two parent focus groups to hear from them about the children's use of the program. The focus groups have also helped all of us hear the parent perspective on the program and what assistance they would like. Both projects are extremely promising and will be for fully reported in the Spring.

Lessons learned the Teacher Research Group

Clearly, each of these projects is worthy of a much more extensive review, but I do want to shift the focus to what, as a result of the last year's effort, we have begun to understand about supporting the teacher research process as a central element in program implementation and evaluation.

The first lesson we have learned is about the value of teacher generated questions.

The teachers had no shortage of questions about the impact of this program, in fact they raised what could clearly be seen as the core questions about the Program's value: is there carry over? how does it apply to special populations? what is the impact of the program on teaching and learning environments? how does one begin to study such an intervention? Throughout the discussions the original questions were refined and several new ones surfaced:

> *"You know, we should look at how this program changes teachers. It can create conflicts between teachers who teach these skills and interact differently and teachers who don't because it's a process and when you go through the process with kids you get at the issue and the next person (another teacher) doesn't, they are just shooting from the hip. We ought to research what happens to teachers,"*

> *"My concern now is how to broaden the number of teachers using the program. Over the summer I met with other teachers and we identified 6 core lessons for primary and 6 lessons for the intermediate grades. We are trying to mentor our own faculty,and champion the use of the program. So the question is how to insure continued schoolwide use of the program? Does it take an inside person?"*

"What about the person coming in to classes (i.e., specialists)? How can the people who come in to the class feel like a member of the community? We talk about inclusion with children, but what about the adults? Everyone wants to feel included."

The second lesson we learned was that research designs created by the teacher were excellent examples of action research and that new learnings from the research were immediately incorporated into the teaching behaviors.

While for some members the research designs took several meetings to evolve for others, after only one or two meetings in the Fall, they had clearly defined research projects and proceeded to begin collecting data. The teacher research meetings simply put did not teach research but rather offered an opportunity for teachers to apply their pre existing knowledge and skills in planning, organizing, and systematic data collection; skills which they use everyday to assess the progress of their students and the achievement of their classroom goals. Nancy quickly coverted one system of assessment to another use related to social competency skills. Doreen began using a sociogram to identify children who are not included andthen went on to track their increasing inclusion in the classroom, and Liz combined reporting, audiotaping, and visual graphing of the research data. I think this is a very important understanding about the whole question of preparation versus opportunity and the redirection of pre-existing skills rather than the need to learn additional ones.

As teachers reported on their data collection strategies, others listened and often incorporated them into their own projects. As the data revealed information, teachers changed their collection techniques or added new ones or changed their behavior in class. Throughout the discussions teachers gave each other feedback and suggestions which they then incorporated into their teaching or their research.

"The "at risk" committee asked us to identify students we are especially worried about, they want a program with parents, beyond the SPED program. Ray, three weeks ago he was first in my class. If I did the same thing today, I wouldn't include him on my list."

"I decided on a new way to collect more data. lasked them to write situations when they were excluded, when they were left out and tried to connect their outisde behavior to the program. I also changed the seating questions."

"I needed to develop questions for data collection and with the help of the group, last time, I came up with a more focused list to use."

"I used the sociogram idea from Doreen's research project...."

"I had to cut down the number of skills we were looking at; it just took too much time."

The third lesson is how difficult it is to do teacher research within K-12 system and how much an external support process is needed.

Some of the tensions relate to the overall stresses on teachers: increased expectations and standardized testing as the measurement of progress, the challenges of special populations, and the fragmented organization of schools:

"There's a new curriculum for the town and in all the curriculum areas, there is not one mention of these skills. It's not included, something on health but nothing on social skills. It's an important part of cooperative learning, people talk about it, but they always run aout of time."

"People have to accept the front end time that says it's worth the effort to teach these skills. Teachers recognize it's important and want to do the program but they have to respond to the immdeiate demands to cover material so test scores will represent progress on measureable objectives."

"When we talk to parents about development, we stress the big picture; it will all go together, just at different rates for each child. But the state, they are coming out with, they want all children to be at the same place by March of 4th grade. A lot of problems result-there really are 2-3 year differences.

"If we had criteria referenced test, part of it could be to evaluate these skills."

"Another teacher (a special ecuation teacher) and I planned to work together but as soon as she got a 60% child she couldn't work in my room but had to stay in the resource center. So there was no way for her to serve my children in the regular classroom."

"Last week it got so bad, 14 of my students were out for band . It was so bad I looked at my whole schedule in 1/2 hour blocks. On Monday, I had the whole class for 40 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the afternoon. I have eight going to guidance and could easily send two more. They are constantly coming and going. When can I even get them

into a circle? If we are going to go with a full inclusion philosophy, we have to look at restructuring the way we do things."

"The full inclusion idea gets so disturbed with pull outs; people coming in and out. It goes on all day and how can you get a group sense?They must wonder where they beong when they are coming and going so often."

"The classroom has lost its integrity. The kids are torn apart, everybody has their own thing and it doesn't all work together for the kids. How can we feel like a community when everyone is moving in and out?"

In the face of these intense (and everyday) pressures, it seems impossible to find the additional time to take time to collect data and reflect on how a program is emerging in a particular classroom with particular students. The difficulties involve everything from equipment, to a lack of additional personnel, to the lingering issue of writing up a research report. These barriers to research, some simple and some more comples, were mentioned throughout the teacher research meetings:

"I was going to use the video camera but it was missing !"

"It's hard to get started again after the holidays, it's so hectic."

"You can really get an appreciation --because I know I'm coming here and to report back and that I should get going. I can appreciate teachers who are not involved in an ongoing group, not getting started, because of all the other pressures."

"I wish I had a co-facilitator or someone to help with note taking at circle. I can't write down everything the kids say."

"I'm concerned about writing this up. I wish I were going through school now, it's different. I just hate to write."

It was a challenge to get to the meetings at the Stone Center. Although teachers said they were energized after each meeting they also suggested that we hold 1/2 day meetings once in a while rather than holding all the meetings in the late afternoon.

The fourth lesson is that what began as research on a curriculum became an opportunity , with the support of others in the group , for self reflection and improved practice.

"I catch myself, and think I don't have to say it that way."

"A little boy said to me, 'I like talking about books, you aren't telling us, you are letting us decide what we can talk about'. I thought that's part of the circle. You (the teacher) are releasing yourself-not the center of attention all the time in the class. He was perceptive enough to see that, vocalize it as an eight years old. The room is different from the way it was for him in the past and for me."

"I'm more interested in their responses. I have trouble putting things in yes/no/maybe form. I like to see theme writing and pull somethings out of the writing (students writing), but I know in research that's not something, not very scientific, just my gut reaction to reading a variety of things. How would I do it ? I don't know but, I can read things and get a general perception. What I might look at is something about the communication between male and female, set up something like a journal writing and from their jounral writing I would pull themes. "

"I am curious about their levels of participation and about my behavior."

Teachers ' Response to the Teacher Research Group

The Reach Out to Schools curriculum created a focus for the research designs. The Stone Center certainly provided a welcoming setting. The structure of monthly meetings, materials and articles relating to teacher research, and facilitation of the group all supported the process. Often the discussions were a time for teachers to share the stresses and frustrations of their worklife in schools,hear suggestions about how to approach problems, and generally receive validation from others that they too had similar concerns: the large number of children and families in stress, the increases in curriculum and testing requirements, issues involving school leadership and, always, the shortage of time in a school day. Beyond these conversations was the developing recognition of the value of doing teacher research:

"...Through doing this research you really do look at what goes on in that circle much more than you would, I think, by just doing the lessons. But when you have a particular thing that you are looking for you tend to really see what's happening."

"I got a lot of ideas here from other people's questions. I think about other people's questions; I may not be doing their project but I think about it. It's nice hearing other people's questions and that puts it all on the table that other people, everybody has questions."

"If you take the time to reflect and think about what's happening then I think you place more value on the program and that's self sustaining."

"You know, teachers are so used to having the thinking done for them. We look in the book, say ok, somebody did it this way, it worked; you know not doing it ourselves. This is a whole complete shift in philosphy."

"The reflection allows you to be an observer of the process and the program as opposed to just a participant in the program."

Support for Teacher Research

I believe that what the teachers have accomplished, against significant difficulties in a short time, is very impressive. Their studies are a blend of creative and systematic approaches to the difficult problem of assessment and program evaluation. They have given and received the support of colleagues, expanded their view of the potential for classroom research, and have made an invaluable contribution to understanding how this program impacts children, classrooms, and themselves as teachers. But, we have to do more to support these efforts, to avoid teacher research becoming an add on to an already packed worklife. The process of bringing teachers together to hear from one another and problem solve could be viewed as the first step in a general restructuring of the role of the classroom teacher to include greater involvement in program development and evaluation. We are currently seeking funds to support their efforts within the group, provide some additional substitute time so they can have uninterrupted time to design projects and write up their findings, and to publish their work. We are also looking at alternative methods of reporting the findings to mimimize the barriers created by the traditional research reporting format and style.

Conclusion

Teacher research within the research and evaluation component of the Reach Out to Schools Social Competency Program provides teachers and program staff with a mutually respectful process for looking at the effectiveness of the program in several classrooms. The process has helped to improve the curriculum , identify areas of success and posed many

questions for future inquiry. It has also modelled the goals of the program which encourage communication, group problem solving, and reflection on behavior.

This process of collaboration is still emerging. Limited funds and limited time hamper what is possible. But the group has demonstrated the value of the effort: through creative classroom research we know much more about how the program impacts children and their teachers than we might have learned if we had taken a more distance, outsider position.

In recent years the separation between educational research and classroom practice has received a great deal of criticism. We know that too often 'research' has been seen as the arena of the privileged few, while the knowledge developed through years of classroom practice has been ignored. Glenda Bissex began her 'teacher research' studying the language development of her son and in her book Seeing for Ourselves has given a broader vision of the potential for such work:

> *"By becoming researchers, teachers take control over their classrooms and professional lives in ways that confound the traditional definition of teacher and offer proof that education can reform itself from within."*

If, in the past, the role of the classroom teacher has been too narrowly constructed, efforts like the Reach Out to Schools Program and the Teacher Research Group demonstrate that given the opportunity and support teachers are quite ready and able to redefine their role within the classroom, the school, and the wider research community.

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